RISK PERCEPTIONS AND HIV TESTING IN FAMILIES LIVING WITH MIXED HIV STATUS


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Background: HIV testing is an important component of prevention, especially for sexually intimate serodiscordant couples. Serodiscordance extends to other family members too, yet we know little about risk perceptions in families affected by HIV. How do they engage with testing and with different public representations of HIV, from super-infectious to untransmissible?

Methods: My health, our family is the first study to document experiences of serodiscordant families in Australia. Qualitative interviews were conducted 2017-2019 with 31 people diagnosed with a blood-borne virus, 15 family members, and 15 people who fitted both categories (n=61). “Family” was self-defined by participants. In this presentation, we focus on families affected by HIV.

Results: Family members had typically tested for HIV in instances of direct bodily contact through sex and birth (partners and children). While a few family members had sought testing despite an absence of exposure, inaccurately believing HIV was infectious in domestic environments, many claimed to not have tested or to ever having considered it. Concerns about personal risk were often framed in family narratives as incompatible with support for the diagnosed member, including when the diagnosis had occurred prior to effective treatment. Several families were literate in the contemporary science of U=U, yet even these described an absence of family discussion about testing.

Conclusion: The lack of emphasis on testing suggests that the importance and well-being of the family connection tended to override the possibility of risk to individual members. While some families may remain resistant to accepting U=U, it is encouraging that many families see their responsibility as one of caring for loved ones, rather than fearing for the self. These findings could provide a guide to health promotion campaigns that engage families in the treatment and care of significant others and in normalising testing practices in the community.

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